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Creativity, Translation, and Teaching Old English Poetry

Helen Brookman and Olivia Robinson

To new readers, Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) literature can seem a uniquely difficult and remote part of the English poetic corpus. Professor of Poetry Fiona Sampson describes her student experience:

Like many undergraduates, I kicked against the then-compulsory course on Oxford's first-year English syllabus. Bad enough, I thought, that I had to read about tedious battles: worse still that I should have to translate what had already *been* translated and was available to us in cribs, or textbooks.¹

After benefiting from 'a year of brilliant teaching' and while doing 'dictionary "finger-work"' in revising for her exams, Sampson goes on to tell us, she 'suddenly realized that translation was a practice of interpretation, and every bit as sophisticated as the close critical reading [she had] already fallen in love with'. In 'tracing the original poem's actual thought and music', she was engaging in 'the most precise, intimate reading' she had ever done, an experience which ensured her 'continuing commitment to poetry in translation'. In Sampson's case it was her own translation activity that ignited her interest. For another poet, Eavan Boland, on the other hand, it was

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¹ Fiona Sampson, 'On Translating Old English Poetry: Anglo-Saxon Attitudes' in *The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation*, edited by Greg Delanty and Michael Matto (London, 2011), pp. 535–6 (p. 535).

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reading the translations of W. H. Auden and Ezra Pound that provided a 'new excitement': 'their sense that this poetry was an archive of lost values and treasurable energies captivated and persuaded me'.²

To professional academic medievalists, it might seem self-evident that Old English literary studies are pleasurable and illuminating in themselves, and also that the texts have led to a rich modern tradition of creative response, exemplified latterly and famously by Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*, 1999. But how best to encourage today's new readers of Old English, especially reluctant or sceptical undergraduate students, to expand their sense of what the study of Old English can be? As teachers of Old English, we wanted to explore how a moment of creative and critical connection with the material could be found by our students – as it was by Boland and Sampson – through contact with contemporary poetic responses to Old English, and, particularly, through their own experience of poetic translation, that process of 'tracing', of 'precise and intimate reading'.

The present article chronicles our investigation into experiential 'creative translation' activities in which we asked students to enter into medieval poetic texts by producing creative, free modern versions that respond to the content, form, style, and sound of the source. We trialled this approach in the academic year 2013–14 in a class of six students at Brasenose College, Oxford, who were in their first year of the BA in English Language and Literature. Through observation of class discussion and structured interviews with four of the students (pseudonymously, 'Carl', 'Eugene', 'Elizabeth', and 'Matthew'), we gathered data on the ways in which the students experienced undertaking and sharing creative work. Andrew Green has argued that given the 'obvious benefits accruing in terms of insight into authors' choices ... the importance of [creative and recreative writing activities] within learning is evident'. But his survey also found that most English lecturers do not perceive these pedagogic methods as valuable.³ We sought to evaluate whether creative translation helps first-year students with varying levels of linguistic knowledge to engage with and develop increased enthusiasm for the difficult and unfamiliar material, and to rise to the challenges of learning to interpret literary texts in their original languages. Although we focus on Old English,

² Eavan Boland, 'On Translating Old English Poetry' in Delanty and Matto, pp. 525–6 (p. 525).

³ Andrew Green, *Four Perspectives on Transition: English Literature from Sixth Form to University* (Egham, 2005), p. 13. He considers that these activities are 'integral to the study of English Language and Literature', although 90% of surveyed English lecturers graded this method of teaching as 'not useful'.

we hope that our findings will be useful within other disciplines, particularly ancient, medieval, and modern languages and literatures.

Teachers of Old English literature in many, if not all, institutions must make decisions (factoring in class size, assessment requirements, and many other constraints) about the extent to which they can introduce their students to the language in which this literature was written, as a preliminary step to reading that literature in its original form. In some modules, teachers may choose to teach Old English material in contemporary English translations, affording students immediate access to core literary narratives and characters, but limiting the extent to which they can engage first-hand with, for example, the distinctive poetic forms and vocabularies of the originals. Many, however, must prepare their students to encounter Old English works in their original language. Indeed, recent discussions have foregrounded the ethical necessity of such a method: as Simon Gaunt writes, for ‘those of us who have a stake in mediating medieval literary culture to modern readers today’, particularly to undergraduate students, the parallel text edition with smooth, idiomatic translation makes texts in some senses ‘*too* readable’; it has ‘all too often ... displaced the original’. In giving our students ‘easy access’ to medieval texts, he continues, ‘are we not in fact missing the point of our pedagogy? Shouldn’t it in fact be *difficult* and *challenging* to access a different culture and isn’t being confronted with the alterity of a strange language part of this process?’⁴

One of the challenges of teaching Old English to undergraduate students is the need to balance sensitivity to such linguistic and cultural alterity against the amount of time and space which can be accorded to language learning. Within the English BA at Oxford, early medieval (in this case, Old English) literature forms part of a compulsory ‘paper’, taught in tutorials and classes in college (in this case by Dr Olivia Robinson, hereafter ‘OCR’). The assessment method for this early medieval literature paper, for which our students were preparing, is an end-of-year examination. One third is a literary-linguistic commentary, for which students are given an excerpt from a set poetic text in Old English, without glosses or translations. They are asked to comment on its themes and its poetic features. Good comprehension of Old English grammar and syntax and accurate translation into modern English are crucial parts of preparing for this commentary task, since students need to be able to recognize such features as variation within a

⁴ Simon Gaunt, ‘Untranslatable’, in *Rethinking Medieval Translation: Ethics, Politics, Theory*, edited by Emma Campbell and Robert Mills (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 243–55 (pp. 254–5).

sentence, or compound words. Virtually all need first to translate their set texts word for word into modern English, and to be sure that they have understood how each sentence works, before they can spot such features and close-read their poetic effectiveness within a commentary.

The emphasis placed in this assessment task on good understanding of the set Old English texts in their original language logically entails an initial focus on language work, particularly on teaching basic Old English grammar. Lectures and language classes are also offered, and attendance is encouraged but not mandated or monitored. Students are expected to do a significant amount of independent study, using textbooks and online resources. Teachers face the task of inducting students with varying aptitudes and previous language learning experience, particularly grammar, in the task of reading and translating their Old English set texts. However, as Allen Frantzen has argued in relation to Old English pedagogy more generally, such an induction carries a significant amount of risk. All too often, it causes students to perceive Old English as fundamentally un-literary and overwhelmingly challenging (as Eavan Boland admits, 'My student image was of a poetry barnacled with historical and grammatical mysteries').⁵ In order to prepare them to critique and discuss Old English poetry in a close, sensitive, and informed way, we (and our textbooks) must first confront 'introductory-level students ... with a formidable array of phonological rules and paradigms'. These, Allen Frantzen argues, 'presume on [students'] willingness [to learn Old English] and ignore the need to build interest in the subject'.⁶ Old English literature becomes unimaginably remote, both temporally and conceptually: students' struggles with translating its grammar and extremely unfamiliar language, ironically, very often lead not to a closer and deeper engagement with it (one of the things teachers seek to stimulate through teaching it in the original language in the first place), but an increasing alienation from it as object of literary-critical study.

Using creative forms of translation as a way of combating this sense of alienation is becoming a more widespread pedagogic tool in the teaching of Old English literature, providing, in Eamon Grennan's phrase, 'a stimulant to enter the spirit of the poems, to feel their power and enjoy their way of proceeding'.⁷ Indeed, as creative engagement

⁵ Boland, p. 525.

⁶ Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, ME, 1990), p. 202.

⁷ Eamon Grennan, 'On Translating Old English Poetry' in Delanty and Matto, pp. 531–3 (p. 532).

with Old and Middle English verse is a feature of the work of many modern and contemporary writers and artists, a vital strand of critical research in the field of Old English explores the post-medieval translation and reception of Old English poetry as part of the broader emerging field of 'medievalism studies'.⁸ In recent years, colleagues across the UK and Ireland have experimented with using and analysing translations and creative reworkings, both inter-lingual and inter-media, in a wide range of ways to prompt students to engage imaginatively with Old English literature.⁹ Such courses, which may contain a strong element of creative work produced by students themselves, or may focus mainly on analysing reworkings produced by other post-medieval creators, acknowledge explicitly, and explore, the ways in which a translation is an act of interpretation, fusing critical judgements with creative thinking, and they reflect this in their assessments. We too aimed to explore with our students the potential of translation to be a *critical* act: translating creatively can help students not just to engage with Old English literature, but also to form and articulate their critical readings of it.

A second, broader context to our work is the emergence of creative writing as a subject of academic study in many UK Higher Education Institutions; it is increasingly integrated into and valorized as a part of the study of English, although not currently incorporated within the formal curriculum of the Oxford BA in English. Nonetheless, for some of our English students, writing creatively is an essential part of their critical practice. We sought to tap into this sense that creativity is an important part of literary study, and to help students to use their own creative abilities to develop critical awareness.

As teachers of Old English literature know, if we want early material to be taught as a vital part of the modern curriculum, then we need to show students how to explore the sorts of things that attract them to texts of any period: to use our own students' terms, 'creative thinking', 'thinking poetically', or 'thinking about language'; 'appreciation of' and 'interest' in it; having a 'sensitivity' to it, and attending to the way it 'expresses ideas'. The earlier students come to explore and appreciate Old English *as* literature like any other, the earlier they are able to do this. The 'creative translation' activities described here took place during the fourth week of their university study of Old English.

⁸ See e.g. Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness: The Uses of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford, 2006); Hugh Magennis, *Translating 'Beowulf': Modern Versions in English Verse* (Woodbridge, 2011).

⁹ We have in mind courses such as Chris Jones' 'Old English Afterlives' at St Andrews or Clare Lees' 'Old English Poems and Modern British Poetry' at KCL.

By introducing them so early in the year-long course, we attempted to disrupt what Frantzen terms (controversially) the ‘paralyzing procedure of “first the grammar, only then the literature” that has made Old English so tedious for so long’.¹⁰ Would formative creative translation activities, where students were given heavily glossed texts and then afforded creative agency to produce their own versions, help students to see their set texts as literary creations, and to engage with them more fully and at an earlier stage? Would the particular relationship between creative and critical thinking and writing lead to an increased sophistication in students’ critical observations about this literature, and offer them a new method in which to formulate them? In designing the creative translation activity, we sought to encourage students to notice, explore, and embrace particular formal, thematic, stylistic, and aesthetic features of the medieval text, in all its alterity. Rather than smoothing away cultural and linguistic difference between medieval text and modern translation (as reading an idiomatic, present-day English parallel translation might), creative translation demands that students engage with a medieval text – its unfamiliar content, form, style, and sound – actively and critically through their own creative work.

As teachers and researchers of English, we have drawn on some social scientific approaches – particularly for gathering our data – but we have also sought to analyse them through an approach that is authentic and familiar to us and our students. In this we are seeking to answer our research questions by ‘close reading’ our student-produced texts: the transcripts of verbal interviews and their collective ‘poem’. We feel there is a rich seam of potential for Humanities-based research and writing to be found in the intersection between teaching practice and research that can advance not only the former but the latter. We hope that this article will provide a useful worked example of Humanities-inflected educational enquiry – or, rather, educationally inflected Humanities enquiry – that seeks not only to evaluate student perspectives on creative and critical learning activities, but to approach broader conceptual issues in the discipline from the perspective of teaching and creative practice. As Ben Knights has observed, academic subjects ‘are produced in the arguments and dialogues of the corridor and classroom, in the encounters between initiates and experts, as much as in the monograph or learned journal’.¹¹ For us, this article is an opportunity to think about the

¹⁰ Frantzen, p. 203.

¹¹ Ben Knights, ‘Intelligence and interrogation: The identity of the English student’, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 4 (2005), 33–52 (p. 34).

practices and processes of the translation of Old English poetry, and the ways in which such translation can form a method of critical response, via the methodology of educational enquiry rather than traditional literary research methods (for example, by analysing a modern translation of an Old English poem ourselves). It forms another way of understanding the translation of Old English literature, a topic which has long been at the heart of Old English literary studies. We hope, then, that this article will contribute not just to discussions about methodologies of Old English pedagogy, but also to wider critical understandings of translation, particularly poetic translation, as a form of critical exploration of Old English literature.

When we trialled the creative translation exercise, the students had been introduced to basic Old English grammar and lexis, and poetic features specific to Old English (kennings, variation, metre): a necessity if they were to be able to close-read the texts in sufficient detail. They had also undertaken the kind of translation activity which is often used to develop close familiarity with Old English grammar: a word-for-word rendering in which each Old English term is carefully explicated by the student. In designing the activity and gathering student responses, we termed this form of translation ‘literal’ to differentiate it from the new, creative translation exercise. Literal translation focuses on articulating a clear meaning or gloss for each word in a sentence, and articulating their grammatical relationships to one another; it is intended to ensure a secure understanding of the sense of each line being discussed.¹²

In the fourth week of term, OCR held two two-hour classes. In preparation for the first class, on the Old English poem *Deor*, students were asked to produce a literal translation of a short excerpt of the poem (provided with a full glossary), much as they were used to doing for our regular classes. They were asked to read a 1994 article by Michael Alexander, also published in this journal, which explored, from the perspective of a poet, some of the challenges, processes, and interpretative decisions which go into crafting a translation of Old English poetry in modern English verse.¹³ We prescribed this article in the hope that it would stimulate the students to ask similar

¹² ‘Literal’ has become a contested term in contemporary Translation Studies, which have questioned whether it is ever possible to translate ‘literally’, since all translation involves change. See David Bellos, *Is that a Fish in your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (London, 2011), esp. Ch. 10, ‘The Myth of Literal Translation’. Bellos proposes the term ‘wording’ for ‘item by item representation’ (pp. 115–17); this is close to the kind of ‘literal’ translation which OCR habitually asked students to undertake for class.

¹³ M. J. Alexander, ‘Old English Poetry into Modern English Verse’, *T&L*, 3 (1994), 69–75.

questions to Alexander's. They talked through their translations of the *Deor*-extract, and discussed the article. They concluded, in the abstract, that translations exist in tension with their sources, but they also expressed deep suspicion about the implications of this in 'real' terms: several students were worried about translations of important, canonical literary works (such as *Beowulf*) 'damaging' those works, and 'betraying' their authors. This suspicion was most sharply articulated when OCR handed out copies of Simon Armitage's 2013 poetic translation of *Deor*. The students were asked to discuss how Armitage responded creatively to features of the Old English poem in his translation. While the students had decided that, in theory, translation entailed a balance between staying close to the source and innovation, when presented with a concrete example they saw its innovation in negative terms. The students were firm that they saw only artistic inferiority and inappropriate textual infidelity in Armitage's version of the Old English poem.

In preparation for the second class, students were each given a few different lines of the Old English poem *The Ruin* and asked to 'produce a creative translation'. Again, a glossary was provided. A handout encouraged them to be as creative as possible, while also responding 'meaningfully' to elements of the language, content, or form of the original. Students also wrote a paragraph reflecting on why they had chosen to translate in a particular way and showing understanding of the original. Students were informed of some suggested learning outcomes of the exercise, although these were not presented as definitive, and they were invited to add their own. The students were told:

Translating creatively *may* help learners to:

- Engage with unfamiliar Old English material (i.e. find points of interest and connection with it, develop greater enthusiasm for studying it)
- Translate the basic sense of Old English language accurately
- Recognize features and techniques of Old English poetry and consider their poetic effect
- Develop skills in creative and critical writing and reflect on their own writing
- Analyse and evaluate the meaning, form, and style of the poetry in its original language

Students brought their translations and reflective paragraphs to the *Ruin* class, which was observed by Dr Helen Brookman (hereafter

HEB). We asked three second-year students, who had studied Old English the previous year, to attend this class and act as small-group 'teachers'. For the first twenty minutes, the second-years led small-group conversations, in which the first-years discussed and edited their creative translations; the larger group then reformed and the first-years presented their translations in turn. OCR recorded the individual translations on a whiteboard, to form a composite poem. The discussions were generally upbeat and engaged, and students were supportive of each other's creativity.

Afterwards, students spoke positively about their experience in the class. Eugene enjoyed 'collaboratively analysing'; 'it felt like a cohesive venture'. Matthew 'thought it was instructive to see that lots of people had picked out similar things. And I thought that sort of stood testament to the original poetry itself, so you get a greater appreciation of it from that.' As a teacher, OCR certainly felt that there was a greater openness and engagement in the 'creative' *Ruin* class than there had been in the *Deor* class. But to understand fully the students' experience of creative translation, we needed to analyse more closely their thoughts on the processes of translation (literal and creative), and also to analyse the poem itself, as a visible product of learning.

After the *Ruin* class, HEB conducted fifteen-minute semi-structured interviews with Matthew, Carl, Elizabeth, and Eugene, exploring their experiences and reflections, and focusing particularly on comparing their usual literal processes of translation with the creative processes they had just undertaken. In order to undertake his literal translation, Matthew describes looking up each individual word in the glossary and then writing what he termed a 'pre-literal translation', annotating his text by writing 'the cases or tenses above': 'super super literal' initial glossing. When he encountered the translations that others had done in the *Deor* class, he saw that they 'seemed to ... couch it in a more modern sentence structure', whereas he 'left [his] quite Old English-y'. He then 'realized after that that it would probably be better to make it slightly more modern and take some liberties with that'.

Matthew's description of this normal process of smoothing the Old English into acceptable modern prose as 'taking liberties' is telling. The modern phrase 'taking liberties' has a negative connotation: 'to go beyond the bounds of propriety, custom, or convention; to behave or act presumptuously' (*OED*). Matthew is keen to maintain the coherence and autonomy of the original, and is at first only willing to produce a gloss, rather than a distinct modern version (let alone a more creative re-working), which may be improper or presumptuous. The awe of the source text that this implies is unhelpful to him as a learner and

literary critic, placing him in a passive and disempowered position of recipient. Carl's position, too, shows him feeling disempowered. He reflects on his lack of understanding of the language – 'I need to look almost everything up' – and speaks of using the glossary provided, working out grammatical relationships 'in order to make sense of the sentence'. Carl sees his translation work as 'about more or less getting the right answer for the purposes of what we're studying and ultimately preparing for an exam'.

Eugene and Elizabeth, meanwhile, employed metaphors to do with piecing together puzzles to discuss literal translation. These metaphors reveal a sense that literal translation involved arriving at a single, correct answer: a jigsaw puzzle can only be fitted together in one way. Jigsaw puzzles work on the basis that there is a pre-determined 'right answer'; the image to be reconstructed is pre-existent. Eugene also drew on the domain of mental arithmetic: 'a weird Sudoku-type thing where you find the cases and you have to slot them in'. Sudoku shares certain features with jigsaw puzzles; there is similarly only one right answer for each box in the grid. Eugene's use of this mathematical metaphor coincides with his use of technical grammatical terminology, such as 'cases'.¹⁴ He later describes how literal translation 'feels quite scientific', and defines glossing as an 'objective process'. Using the puzzle metaphors suggests that these students, like Carl, viewed literal translation as a task whose outcome was unequivocally 'right' or 'wrong', and which involved the correct re-assembly of a series of dis-assembled, pre-established parts.

This approach to translation led to a sense of critical and affective alienation from the texts under discussion. Eugene and Elizabeth referred to distance and separation, both temporal and emotional, to describe their relationship with an Old English text when they were translating it literally. So, Elizabeth describes herself 'struggling to get through the divide' between herself and the poem, while Eugene calls it 'an archaic thing that I was trying to fit together'. Not only does 'archaic' underscore how Eugene views the Old English poem as *extremely* distant in time from him, but the use of 'thing' expresses his sense that the poem, by virtue of its archaic status, is actually an unidentified object, rather than a 'text' or 'poem'. For Eugene, translating literally positioned the Old English poem as an alien object from the distant past, akin to an object archaeologically excavated from the ground, to be pieced together in a scientific, rule-based fashion.

¹⁴ On student perceptions of translation exercises, and the challenges these perceptions pose to learning, see Bob Lister, 'Latin in Transition', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 8 (2009), 191–200.

Eugene's description of translating a particular half-line of *Deor* gives a practical illustration. He refers to lines 1b-2 of the set extract: 'wræces cunnade, | anhydig eorl, earfoþa dreag' ('of exile he [Weland] knew, | resolute man, of hardships he suffered'):

I found that quite confusing initially because ... having learned about the genitive case ... I didn't expect it to be used in conjunction with the verb ... I was ... convinced that the case meant that couldn't happen, so I was looking for a different meaning.

When translating these lines, Eugene actively employed his understanding of the grammatical rules of the genitive case in Old English. He correctly identified the genitive case endings on the nouns 'wræces' and 'earfoþa'. However, perhaps because he expected the genitive to signal possession (as in 'the sword *of* the king'), the use of the case with a verb (e.g. 'to know *of* something') appeared alien to him.¹⁵ He continues:

I had a voice in my head when I was translating that, saying that it would make sense for him to ... 'know of exile' ... but I was ... waiting for something else to emerge, because it was in the genitive case.

Eugene translated the genitive case as 'of', and came up with the phrase to 'know of exile' – which he 'knew ... would make sense'. But the way in which translating literally entailed strict adherence to grammatical knowledge actually got in the way of his understanding of these lines. Despite the fact that he had come up with a plausible reading, that reading was contradicted by his application of the factual, grammatical knowledge which he had so far amassed and could remember: he didn't realize that the genitive case could work like this, and his desire to fit with what he *thought* the case should do trumped his initial reading. Most interestingly, he goes on to reflect on how translating creatively helped him to get over this barrier. He explains how 'tak[ing] a step back' and 'being more free', actions he implicitly associates with *creative* translation, enabled him to realize that 'knowing *of* hardships' made perfect sense. Translating creatively paradoxically freed Eugene to be more precise, in terms of his understanding, than attempting to translate literally.

Matthew began his creative translation by undertaking a literal translation and then, rather than trying to capture it in a 'modern phraseology', he sought to 'accentuate the poetic features that I

¹⁵ While this and other uses of the genitive had been explained by OCR, it is quite usual for students to forget about the less common ones, due to the high volume of grammatical information they have to process quickly about the case system in Old English.

thought it [the poem] was trying to highlight itself'. He describes how he wanted to use a 'more modern lexis'; to '[play] with' and 'change' it to 'say different things'. This is quite a shift in attitude from the distant veneration he revealed when discussing literal translation. He stated: 'I enjoyed [translating creatively] a lot more than the usual translation and it did feel like a really creative process.' Yet despite this clear change in approach, Matthew's expressed attitude to the two processes is complex and at times contradictory.

As suggested by his veneration of the source poem, his initial position on poetic translation is conservative and suspicious:

on Monday ... I was quite unsure as to ... the worth of the translation. Because I thought ... there's something ... lacking, the inspiration or something ... I wasn't sure of the ethics of taking something that someone else had said and changing it into a modern context, I thought that was kind of dangerous.

The language here is heightened: he speaks in terms of ethics and danger. Later, he expressed 'worry' – a word signifying an emotional engagement – about the possibility of a modern version dislodging the authority of the original. His consistent use of the past tense in reporting these views and his increased openness to 'taking liberties' shows he has eschewed this position. But when he is asked if his view has changed, he resists acknowledging that poetic translation can be fully creative or generative: 'Not necessarily. I'd just say that I enjoyed it a lot and I ... appreciate a little bit more the art of it now.'

The primary distinction that Matthew makes throughout the interview is between the 'fun' of the creative exercise and so-called 'serious' study. The language of enjoyment is associated primarily with his new openness to creative translation: 'I did enjoy it. It's fun ... to write in an older style and it's fun to interpret older poetry in your own way. And it's fun to discuss those ideas.' Although we would argue that Matthew *has* undergone a conceptual shift around the generative potential of translation, he repeatedly seeks to downplay this with this overwording of the adjective 'fun'. He contrasts the 'fun' of the creative translation with the 'seriousness' of more traditional academic work, such as an essay. Indeed, he posited a distinction between his 'own emotions whilst doing it and the ... actual worth of ... doing it'. Although he is hesitant about stating it boldly, here Matthew is denying the value of an exercise that he sees as primarily an amusement rather than needing deeper cognition. He's saying, 'I may concede enjoying it, but that doesn't mean I found it worthwhile', or, rather, 'I had fun and therefore it *couldn't* be worthwhile.'

Even as he dismisses the creative exercise as mere ‘fun’, however, Matthew notes that ‘there is a lot of meaning in enjoying . . . things like language and . . . interpreting it’. Here he reveals that, although it may not be ‘profound’ in the way he expects, textual and linguistic pleasure are meaningful in another way, and they have a defensible value in their own right as a part of the academic study of literature.

In preparing his creative translation, Carl, like Matthew, went ‘back to the methods we’ve been practising in terms of understanding the sense’ and then ‘start[ed] to make modifications to achieve an overall stylistic effect’. Carl seemed to feel the need to defend this approach: he excused himself on account of his lack of knowledge, and half-apologized for, half-defended, his use of learning resources like the glossary to develop a basic understanding, before he could think about the finer literary details. Yet the development of this understanding as a necessary building block for producing the creative version was precisely one of the learning outcomes we hoped for.

We were aware that the students lacked prior knowledge and understanding of the poem and language, which is why we prepared the glossary and other resources. So why did Carl feel the need to defend ‘resorting to the glossary’? The handout also encouraged them to ‘Be as creative as you like!’ and, although the learning outcomes did not include ‘write poetry of literary merit’, they did include higher-order learning such as ‘recognize features and techniques of Old English poetry and consider their poetic effect’. We sought to reassure the students that the creative task was meant to be an initial encounter with full creative freedom (rather than one where they were looking for the ‘right answer’), and not one that would be judged or assessed.

Perhaps this was a challenge for assessment-focused Carl, who could not develop a strategic way to complete the task successfully, as he could with the literal translation. The freedom to approach the task however they wanted to may have been a disorienting change for students who rely on clear signposting to find strategic ways to achieve. There was no pre-determined ‘correct’ version of the poem that students could take a short cut to producing, and although Carl did precisely what we hoped (i.e. develop an understanding of the original before making creative choices), he evidently felt anxious about his performance. The truth is that, although we sought to shape our language to encourage the creative aspect of the task, the process as a whole did include some ‘right answer’ elements (e.g. basic understanding of the source text using the glossary). This perhaps created a tension for students between ‘finding the right answer’

(producing an acceptable translation they could defend on grounds of accuracy if asked) and 'demonstrating creativity'.

Neither is 'being creative' a simple thing to do on demand. Having no assessment criteria was intended to be liberating, but students often, sometimes subconsciously, use criteria (and other more implicit evidence about what high-quality work looks like) as signposts, and can feel lost without them. They may have felt that, although they would not be assessed explicitly, their outputs would to some degree be judged, by their classmates and teacher, and by other, implicit criteria that they could not anticipate. In a traditional English degree, literary products (and their creators) are made the primary subject of study. Putting students into the role of creators and their outputs into the genre of literary products disrupts a powerful and long-held hierarchy. Our attempts to insist that the stakes were low were disingenuous; to students of literature, being a creative writer is a high-stakes business.

What seems to have particularly captured Carl's imagination is the idea that he would be creating a version of the poem for a 'non-academic audience'. Although he enjoyed sharing it with his peers, he was also interested in how 'people who weren't involved really in the academic study of Old English' would respond to it. Carl here reveals that he felt this task had a real purpose – not one we mentioned to them – of communicating what the poem is 'trying to do' to an actual audience. This just happens to involve developing a deep, authentic understanding of the poem, but as an incidental part of producing something that is useful. Carl's focus on a non-academic audience suggests that he was appreciating something that he had not previously felt in relation to Old English: his relative expertise. He used the word 'deliver' twice, and considered 'how we can use what we know'. The traditional essay and critical commentary are prepared for an imaginary academic audience, and, as such, feel like the assessment exercises that they are. For Carl, the production of a creative translation has a potential real audience and therefore a purpose, and to achieve this purpose he needs to 'balance the different challenges' of the multiple parts of the complex task. This reveals a picture of someone engaged in a rich kind of learning, making complex creative choices based on a secure understanding of the original.

Eugene and Elizabeth used a number of revealing metaphors to describe this engagement. Eugene describes how, when translating creatively 'you can explore more avenues' of understanding. His use of the verb 'explore' and the image of 'avenues' in the plural acknowledge a multiplicity of possible interpretative routes into the text, and suggest that the creative translator can experience a range

of these. Related to this is the idea of potential or possibility. Eugene describes how ‘creatively it was quite a positive thing to... imagine your own possibilities ... what could be happening’. Again, Eugene refers to possibilities in the plural. He also uses the modal verb ‘could’ to introduce a subjunctive rather than indicative mood: both features suggest that there is no pre-determined ‘right’ answer, and that the translation arrived at is a product (at least in part) of his *own* imaginative engagement with the ‘possibilities’ the text raises. Elizabeth discussed creative translation in a comparable way: as ‘an opening up’ that is ‘revelatory, almost’. Images of division and struggle have given way to images of understanding and realization of unimagined potential.

Elizabeth also underlined the fact that what is illuminated or revealed through creative translation is something which is already there (although perhaps unperceived) in the Old English poem being translated. As we saw earlier, the class approached in a very conservative way the idea that translations, by necessity, re-interpret their sources. Elizabeth refined her position after the class; while she wanted to make clear that translation isn’t (or shouldn’t be) about ‘turning’ a text ‘into’ something else, she still felt that it does have the potential to alter the text quite radically, by bringing out hidden elements which may have been overlooked.

Both Eugene and Elizabeth used expressions which give implicit agency to the poem itself, such as ‘opening yourself up’ to the poem, when they were talking about how they experienced creative translation. The activity caused these students to feel as though things were being communicated to them about (or even *by*) the poem which they were not previously in a position to understand. Creative translations are not straightforwardly ‘produced’ by the student objectively ‘slotting in’ different pieces of the puzzle from the glossary; they are conceptualized as a more holistic experience involving opening up the self to the possibilities and potentialities offered by the poem.

Eugene in particular expanded on how this experience felt, and compared it implicitly to undertaking literal translation:

I got so ... hooked up with this image ... that I ended up turning it into... a re-reading ... I got a bit carried away ... I had completely forgotten that it was past tense, I had completely forgotten that the stone stood there.

His descriptions imply an immersive experience: ‘hooked up’, ‘carried away’. These metaphors suggest that he was involuntarily swept

up by the task: he ‘found himself’ doing something, as though unintentionally. Eugene describes himself ‘waking up’ in the cold light of day, and being surprised by what he ‘realizes’ when re-reading his work, implying there was a dream-like quality to the way he became ‘hooked up’ within his translation. His emphatic repetition of the phrase ‘I had completely forgotten’ underlines how he lost sight of Old English grammar and was led to a new, emotional, intuitive engagement with the material: ‘I took a lot from that poetically’, he went on, ‘in a way that I haven’t actually done with Old English yet.’

Turning from the student interviews to the poem they produced collaboratively in class, and reflecting on their group discussions, we can see how creativity fed into this emotional engagement. The poem also provides evidence of ways in which their creative translation work has promoted their learning about Old English poetic practice. The discussions the class had – both small-group and whole-group, about individuals’ choices and about the new poem they created through piecing together their own individual contributions – demonstrated how undertaking creative work enabled them to enhance their critical understanding of Old English poetry, and also develop their approaches to translation as a critical practice.

The Mourning After the Empire Before

[Elizabeth]

But look, this stone remains – though time
has run laughing through this city
and blown down what giants built up.

The roofs are fallen in and
the towers are fallen in.

There is frost on the walls
which were built to keep out winter
and the gates are gap-toothed.

These are the bones of the city
and time has picked them.

[Carl]

Earth-grip holds

The great creators departed, deserted

And the hard-gripping hell

Until a hundred great-grandfathers and their woe-wailing kin

Go deep below the ground

Rotting away, the earth succumbs to ruin.

[Matthew]

The ruin had fallen

Broken and demolished into mounds of rock.

There, long ago, legions of men glowed,
Gold-bright, and adorned the stone,
glorious and brazen
In the brilliance of their beer-jackets.

[Eugene]
The stream surged – stoneworks stood
Walling all hot, warbling water
Where the glinting heart once gurgled.

Alliteration and metre are perhaps the most immediately characteristic aspects of Old English verse to students new to the discipline: its four-stress metre and strict alliterative patterns are often unknown to students used to later poetic forms. Carl, for example, described the ‘accumulative effect’ of alliteration linked to the theme of accumulating time passing within his extract; he deliberately retained the same alliterative sounds in the lines ‘the hard-gripping hell’ and ‘a hundred great-grandfathers’. Within Eugene and Matthew’s small-group discussion, this aspect of Old English verse was one of the first things highlighted as a characteristic ‘marker’ of the *Ruin*’s Old English-ness or difference, which they felt they did not want to change. Eugene repeatedly underlined his sense of the importance of retaining the sound of the Old English poem. Indeed, his attempt to replicate the alliteration and stress patterns is proportionally the heaviest: Eugene only produced three lines of verse, but each of those lines has four stressed or accented syllables, and of these syllables either all or all except one alliterate:

The stream surged – stoneworks stood
Walling all hot, warbling water
Where the glinting heart once gurgled.

When introducing these students to the basics of Old English metre, OCR used a version of the definition found in most Old English textbooks:

Each line of Old English poetry consists of two half-lines ... Each half-line has two syllables which are accented ... one of the two accented syllables in the first half-line must alliterate with the first accented syllable of the second half-line. It is permissible for both accented syllables in the first half-line to alliterate ... but in the second half-line only the first accented syllable may alliterate.¹⁶

¹⁶ Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, sixth edn (Oxford, 2001), pp. 161–2.

Clearly, Eugene has not exactly replicated Old English stress-patterns using this precise academic definition: if we divide his three lines of verse into 'half-lines', with two stresses to each half-line, we can see that in two instances, he does indeed have both accented syllables in the second half-line alliterating. But he does seem to have tried exceptionally hard to recreate a sustained sense of what Old English verse sounds like more broadly, how it feels to hear it, and what its particular rhythmic qualities are.

Matthew also noted explicitly the challenges of writing alliteratively: he too wanted to retain the sound of Old English verse in his translation, and he had found that he had to search hard for words which were semantically appropriate, but also began with the right letter. This was a key moment in both students' learning about the word-stock of Old English poetry, causing them to realize that poets needed a wide variety of poetic vocabulary in order to be able to abide by the strict alliterative patterns. This had implications for their approach to another key feature of Old English verse: compound words. As Old English poets do, both experimented with compound words as a way of dealing with the requirement to balance semantic sense with alliterative restrictions.

In Matthew's translation there are two compound words ('gold-bright' and 'beer-jackets') in three lines, both of which work with his desire to make stressed syllables form alliterating patterns:

There, long ago, **l**egions of men **g**lowed,
Gold-bright, and **a**dorned the **s**tone,
glorious and **b**razen
In the **b**rilliance of their **b**eer-jackets

In group discussion, Matthew expressed his satisfaction in coming up with these compounds: he and his group recognized that compounding is reflective of one aspect of Old English poetic practice, and that it often enables alliterative patterns, which the group saw as a key aesthetic feature of Old English verse, to be more easily constructed. Matthew's compounds therefore worked on two fronts with the group consensus on the importance of 'sounding like' Old English in a creative translation.

As we saw, in their class on *Deor* the students as a group were sceptical about the value of translation as a creative activity. For example, the group condemned unanimously as inappropriate Armitage's use of the compound 'soul-mate' for 'gesippe' ('companion') in his *Deor*-translation, but they were reluctant to consider what *new* connotations 'soul-mate' brought to the poem. Even Armitage's decision to use

four-stress alliterative lines was conceptualized negatively. (This is especially interesting given the way in which some students, when translating creatively themselves, clearly wanted their *Ruin* translations to ‘sound’ like Old English, and therefore strove to produce similar metrical structures to Armitage’s.) The small-group discussions about students’ creative choices, effects, and productions provided a particularly supportive and exploratory arena for them to re-examine these concerns.¹⁷ In the course of these discussions, students moved from a position where they saw only loss, to one where they could set loss against gain, and appreciate what is brought to a translation by different creative choices.

It was clear from the range of data we gathered that the students did indeed develop their familiarity with a range of key features of Old English verse through creative translation: most chose to ‘inhabit’ very attentively what they saw as highly meaningful formal and thematic features of their section of the *Ruin*. These outcomes demonstrate the effects of creative translation at a micro level: i.e., at the level of helping students to understand, and engage critically with, Old English poetry. However, there were also important learning outcomes at a macro level, in terms of the students’ conceptualization of the activity of translation more broadly. Undertaking creative translation themselves, and closely discussing their ‘works-in-progress’, helped them to nuance and extend their understandings of the potentials of poetic translation as a creative and interpretative exercise: what Stanley Greenfield has described as ‘simultaneously a poem and, by virtue of the nature of translation, an act of criticism’.¹⁸

Indeed, we would argue that the students’ translation itself embodies ‘an act of criticism’, a critical reading of *The Ruin* in terms of some of its central themes and concerns. Matthew’s choice of ‘beer-jackets’ as an image in which to clothe the ‘legions of men’ responds obliquely to the final line of his extract (*Ruin*, l. 34), in which the men are described as shining ‘wig-hyrstum’, ‘in war-trappings’, and ‘win-gal’, ‘wine-flushed’. Matthew explained his own interpretation of his part of *The Ruin*: he felt it evoked the atmosphere of a hangover, a speaker remembering the ‘technicolour’ of partying with his (male) mates from the greyness

¹⁷ Phillip Smallwood suggests that ‘the student experience of critical writing . . . resist[s] the systems of social support, through writers’ groups and the like, that make possible a critical-creative “common pursuit”’. Phillip Smallwood, ‘More Creative than Creation? On the Idea of Criticism and the Student Critic’, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 59 (2002), 59–71 (p. 60). The small-group discussions provided such a ‘system of social support’ which integrated critical with creative discussion.

¹⁸ Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Readable Beowulf: The Old English Epic Newly Translated* (Carbondale, IL, 1982), p. ix.

of the next day. 'Beer-jackets' blended a focus on homosocial bonding through drinking with an image of men donning protective garments. In 'beer-jackets', Matthew transfers and merges 'wig-hyrstum' and 'win-gal' into one. The shining body-armour of the wine-flushed men morphs into 'brilliant beer-jackets': the term deploys the economy and metaphoric density of Old English poetic compounding to reflect critically on the social landscape depicted by the *Ruin*-poet. Matthew's men are as glowing in their night-on-the-town confidence – indeed, brazenness – as they are insulated and united by the effects (physical and social) of drinking together.

Perhaps most interestingly, however, 'beer-jackets' also encapsulated a sense of playfulness and taboo: it is a highly colloquial word from a non-academic register. Outside this group discussion, Matthew expressed deep disquiet at 'taking liberties' with a source text in a translation. Here, however, we see him enjoying using his translation to 'take liberties' with the academic study of Old English: the whole group enjoyed the fact that this is not the kind of word normally associated with academic discourse. Yet it expressed a real sense of the homosocial atmosphere of this (and other) Old English verse: being funny and provocative enabled the students to articulate a critical response to the imaginative world of Old English poetry.

The translations also respond insightfully to *The Ruin*'s imagery, especially the characteristically Old English formulaic imagery. Elizabeth deals particularly interestingly with the well-known formulaic image of the poem's semi-destroyed landscape as 'enta geweorc' (*Ruin*, l. 2b, 'the work of giants'). She begins her translation reflecting what seems to be the sense of this expression: time has 'blown down what giants built up'. Here, the giants are imagined, as in the formulaic phrase, as the ones who 'built' the buildings that are now decaying. However, Elizabeth later reworks the image of the giant, turning it into a structuring image for the whole city: 'These are the bones of the city | and time has picked them'. Rather than being the work of giants, the city has now become a giant body: its ruined buildings are imagined as a huge skeleton, a giant's 'bones', its open gates recast as 'gap-toothed' mouths. The image of time 'picking' these bones clean also responds insightfully to an innovative compound verb in the Old English text: the city is described figuratively as 'aeldo undereotone' (*Ruin*, l. 6a, 'under-eaten by old age'). Elizabeth picks up on this formulation, visualizing time literally 'eating' the city like flesh from bones. She disentangles passive constructions and recasts them as active verbs to reinforce this: 'aeldo undereotone' becomes 'time has picked them', and 'wyrde gebræcon' (*Ruin*, l. 1b, 'broken by fate') becomes 'time has

run laughing through this city'. Her contributions to group discussion made clear that this change was to express her understanding of the way in which *The Ruin* constructs the importance of time as an active, metamorphosing force.

The students arrived at the title of their poem through a discussion at the end of the class, in which the group briefly analysed the core themes of their composite poem. This exchange was one of the most genuinely excited and collaborative discussions about Old English literature that this group had ever had, and its end result was a title which, in different ways, honoured all the students' interpretative choices, from Elizabeth and Carl's emphasis on time's impact on previous civilizations, through Eugene's emotional connection to the water as beating heart of the city, to Matthew's homosocial hangover:

Matthew: it's about what's different about what was then and now,
represented in a sensory way

Seamus:¹⁹ the morning after the night before ... the hangover

Eugene: I like the sense of life-force that declines

Elizabeth: the morning after the empire before

Matthew: the era after the epoch before

Seamus: the *mourning* after the empire before!

The structure of the class, with individual preparation followed by small-group, then whole-group, discussion and collaboration, melded individually-produced translations into a composite and group-authored whole in a way which in some senses responded to Old English poetic practice. Recent work on literary translation has explored the creative potentials of collaborative translation, in which more than one translator works together on a jointly-produced text.²⁰ In some ways, the entire Old English poetic canon can be conceived of as an exercise in collaborative composition, or re-composition, since many features of the composition and transmission of Old English poetry (its almost universal anonymity; its use of shared poetic vocabulary and formulaic systems and its debated 'residual orality'; the textual instability resulting from its scribal transmission) confound post-medieval conceptions of individual authorship and intellectual ownership.²¹ The format of the class, in other words, involved students

¹⁹ Seamus was one of our second-year student 'teachers'.

²⁰ For one example see the discussion by Boris Dralyuk, 'Two Reflections only: Collaborative Translation and the Poetry of Donaldas Kajokas', *World Literature Today*, 11 February 2014 (online at www.worldliteraturetoday.org.blog).

²¹ On the impact of orality on scribal transmission, see Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge, 1990). On Old English poetic lexis and formulaic systems, see Andy Orchard, 'Old English and Latin Poetic Traditions', in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, edited by Corinne Saunders (Chichester, 2010), pp. 65–82.

in a collaborative exercise in creativity which challenged their prior idea that a poem always has a single author, and the resultant student-created poem is – like its Old English counterpart – the product of multiple voices, interpretations, and experiences.

The Ruin proved to be an entirely appropriate poem for ‘creative translation’. Both the poet and the students look back on and respond to a cultural artefact, a remnant of a past culture. To the Anglo-Saxon speaker in the poem, the Roman baths are – in Eugene’s words – an ‘archaic thing’. The poet takes as his theme the loss of a civilization – which, although temporally distant, inhabited the same geographical space as his implied speaker – and the decay of its civic material remains. He imagines the ruins populated with bright, noisy people; his Romans are viewed through the lens of the Anglo-Saxon cultural and poetic experience: ‘beorn monig’ (‘many a warrior’) enjoys material ‘sinc’ (‘treasure’) in ‘meadoheall monig mondreama full’ (‘many a mead-hall, filled with human pleasures’). The poet imagines the Roman ruins inhabited; through the imagination, he inhabits them himself.

The present-day students, in their turn, imagine Anglo-Saxons wearing the ‘beer-jackets’ that are more reminiscent of their own cultural experience. They are asked, in their Old English studies, to develop understanding of literary remains of the distant past; in this activity in particular, they are asked to go further, to take part in the poetic process from the active, insider perspective of creator. The destructive figure of time that Elizabeth personifies is responsible not only for the decay of the ruins, but for the gulf that has opened up between the poem as recorded on the manuscript page and their own understanding. Poet and student-translator undergo mirror processes of reflecting on and seeking to make sense of past cultures, and then revivifying them through literary creation.

The experiential activity of ‘creative translation’ thus overcomes historical distance, without eliding difference. It is not about revealing Old English literature to be simplistically ‘accessible’, ‘relevant’, or ‘modern’, or to make the Anglo-Saxons seem the same as us. Rather, it seeks to make the difference and difficulty of the text productive rather than alienating, to use these features to spark enquiry. Medieval-sceptical students are thus encouraged and empowered to move away from their previous teleological assumptions about the evolution of English literature, and to develop an awareness that their responses to and understandings of the past are always partial, imaginary, or constructed. Thus, the process of creative translation can form a point of critical and creative departure that allows new readers to

make meaningful connections with historical texts and to enter into conversation with them, while respecting their alterity. The poem is made, in Roy Liuzza's words, 'to seem like a living thing rather than a dead one'.²² Translating creatively is one method – and there are many others in teaching older literature and languages – of prompting the emotional and imaginative engagement required for the reader to inhabit and reanimate the material.

King's College London

Brasenose College, Oxford

²² R. M. Liuzza, 'Lost in Translation: Some Versions of *Beowulf* in the Nineteenth Century', *English Studies*, 83 (2002), 281–95 (p. 295).